

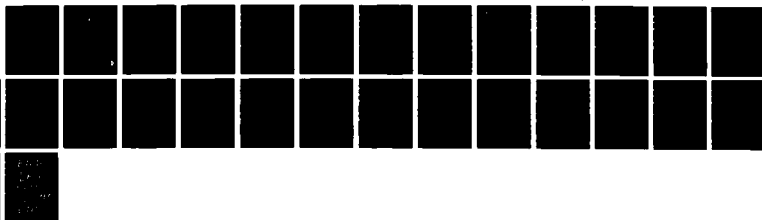
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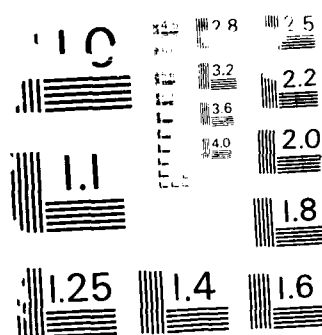
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BOOK ANALYSIS

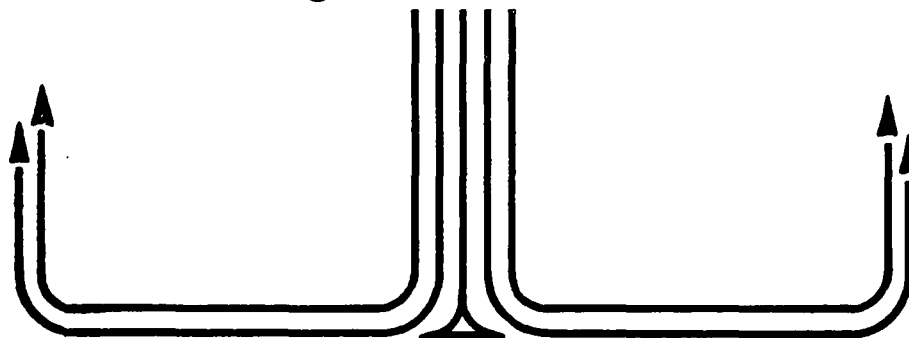
THE 25-YEAR WAR:

AMERICA'S MILITARY ROLE IN VIETNAM

BY GENERAL BRUCE PALMER, JR.

MAJOR IRVIN LON CAKERICE 88-0440

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**TITLE** BOOK ANALYSIS: THE 25-YEAR WAR: AMERICA'S MILITARY ROLE  
IN VIETNAM  
BY GENERAL BRUCE PALMER, JR.

**AUTHOR(S)** MAJOR IRVIN LON CAKERICE, USAF

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Submitted to the faculty in partial fulfillment of  
requirements for graduation.

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THIS PROJECT ANALYZES GENERAL PALMER'S BOOK, <u>THE 25-YEAR WAR: AMERICA'S MILITARY ROLE IN VIETNAM</u> . THE ANALYSIS EXAMINES PALMER'S ASSESSMENT OF THE US STRATEGY AND LESSONS PERTINENT TO BOTH CIVILIAN AND MILITARY LEADERS. THE AUTHOR RECOMMENDS THIS BOOK FOR A UNIQUE PERSPECTIVE ON THE WAR.						
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## PREFACE

The author chose the book analysis as his project because it allowed him the opportunity to read additional material related to the military. He chose The 25-Year War: America's Military Role in Vietnam by General Bruce Palmer, Jr., because it was not advertised as a typical military version of the war. This was a war that the United States not only lost, but one that divided the country to a degree unprecedented since the Civil War. The author analyzed the lessons learned to determine if they were sound.

In order to determine if the lessons learned were sound, the author compared the lessons with the principles of war studied in this school. The book, On Strategy: The Vietnam War in Context, by Colonel Harry G. Summers, Jr. was used as the primary source to support General Palmer's assessment of the war. The project is organized in four chapters:

Chapter One provides background information on General Palmer and examines his military experiences. This insight helps identify any bias in the author.

Chapter Two is a synopsis of the American involvement in Vietnam and develops the framework for the reader to use in understanding the author's assessment of the war.

Chapter Three summarizes the author's assessment of the operational performance of the military forces, the strategy used by the US, and finally the lessons learned. This chapter also compares General Palmer's views of the war with other sources, particularly, Colonel Summers.

Chapter four is a brief conclusion to the project.

A special thanks goes to my wife and children for enduring my miserable disposition during the final six weeks of preparing this project.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Major Irvin Lon Cakerice is an Air Training Command instructor pilot, currently attending the Air Command and Staff College at Maxwell AFB, Alabama. He recieved his commission from AFROTC in 1971 and began his career at Vance AFB, Oklahoma, in Undergraduate Pilot Training (UPT). After earning his pilot wings, he served as a B-52 pilot at March AFB, California. During this period he flew combat missions in Southeast Asia immediately after the "Christmas bombing." In 1975 he separated from the Air Force to venture into the civiliam sector. In 1979 he returned to the Air Force through the Voluntary Recall Program where he was assigned to the USAF Academy, Colorado, as an instructor pilot in the Pilot Indoctrination Program. From there, he went to AFROTC Headquarters at Maxwell AFB, Alabama as the Chief of the Special Training Branch. In his most recent position at Headquarters Air Training Command, Randolph AFB, Texas, he worked in the pilot training division under the Director of Operations. Since 1982, he has worked in developing a pre-UPT flight program for AFROTC commissionees.

Major Cakerice holds a Bachelor of Arts Degree in education from Coe College and a Master of Arts Degree in Human Resources Development from Webster University. He is married and has three children.



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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Part of our College mission is distribution of the students' problem solving products to DoD sponsors and other interested agencies to enhance insight into contemporary, defense related issues. While the College has accepted this product as meeting academic requirements for graduation, the views and opinions expressed or implied are solely those of the author and should not be construed as carrying official sanction.

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REPORT NUMBER 88-0440

AUTHOR(S) MAJOR IRVIN LON CAKERICE

TITLE BOOK ANALYSIS: THE 25-YEAR WAR: AMERICA'S MILITARY ROLE IN VIETNAM  
BY GENERAL BRUCE PALMER, JR.

I. Purpose: To provide a comparative book analysis of The 25-Year War: America's Military Role in Vietnam by General Bruce Palmer, Jr.

II. Objectives: To compare General Palmer's book with other authors' views and opinions on the problems the US encountered in the Vietnam War. The book, "On Strategy: The Vietnam War in Context" by Colonel Harry G. Summers, Jr., is used as the primary source.

III. Discussion of the Analysis: Many books have been written concerning the Vietnam War, but few have had the perspective of The 25-Year War. General Palmer's experiences in World War II, Korea, and Vietnam lend credence to his military perceptions, while his working knowledge of the Washington arena gave him a keen insight into the political involvement of the war. Palmer's book both condemns and commends key military and civilian players.

The first chapter of the analysis examines the author's background and military experiences. His perceptions, influenced by his military experiences, are supported by his insight gained in the Washington political community.

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## CONTINUED

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Chapter two is a synopsis of Part I of the book and describes America's involvement in Vietnam from 1963-1975. The author focuses on the role of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) and their influence on the events of Vietnam. His discussion of the period from 1968-1969 emphasizes the unrest in the states and the problems the Army was facing as a result of the war. General Palmer concludes his discussion of the American involvement by describing Vietnamization, the cease-fire years, and the final war years prior to the 1975 surrender of South Vietnam.

Chapter three summarizes Part II of the book, General Palmer's assessment of the war. He identifies the positive and negative aspects of the US operational performance, examines the US strategy, and outlines the lessons learned. This chapter also compares General Palmer's assessment with Colonel Summers' views of the war.

The final chapter is a brief conclusion to the project.

## Chapter One

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

The first chapter of this book analysis examines the author's background to determine which experiences might influence his thinking, his philosophies, his opinions, and, finally, his writing. A better understanding of the author allows the reader to be aware of potential bias that would influence the author's perception of problems, solutions used to resolve the problems and the lessons learned. The following section will cover General Palmer's background and military experiences.

### AUTHOR'S BACKGROUND

General Bruce Palmer, Jr. was born in Austin, Texas on 13 April 1913. His father was a World War II general who influenced his decision to attend the United States Military Academy at West Point. He graduated with a Bachelor of Science Degree, ranking fifth in the 1936 class. This ranking was well above that of his more famous classmates, General William Westmoreland and General Creighton Abrams, who both served in senior positions in Vietnam and in the Pentagon.

He continued his education while in the service, receiving an honorary doctorate from the University of Akron and his Doctorate of Military Science from Norwich University. To fulfill his professional military education requirements, he completed the Armed Forces Staff College in 1947 and the US Army War College in 1952.

General Palmer married Kathryn Mary Sibert on 2 December 1936. He and his wife had two children: Robin and Bruce III.

### AUTHOR'S MILITARY EXPERIENCES

During his illustrious career, General Palmer was involved in three different conflicts: World War II, Korea, and Vietnam. He had his first staff job in 1942 in the War Department General Staff. Following this job, he went to the Southwest Pacific Area and then to Korea where he was the commanding officer of the 63rd Infantry Regiment. Upon returning to the states in 1947, he went

to Headquarters, 1st Army as a chief of plans and operations and from there, to Fort Benning, where he instructed at the Infantry School. Next he spent three years in Europe in various staff and command jobs before returning to the states to attend the War College in 1951. He remained on the faculty until 1957. His next job took him back to Washington where he was the White House Liason Officer for the US Army Chief of Staff. From there, it was back to War College to serve as the Deputy Commandant from 1959-1961. From 1962 to 1967, he moved regularly between Korea, Washington, and Fort Bragg. In 1967 he went to Vietnam and held the positions of Commanding General, II Field Force, as well as Deputy Commanding General of US Forces in Vietnam under General Westmoreland. He left Vietnam in 1968 to become the Vice Chief of Staff for the US Army where he once again worked for Westmoreland. He served as the Vice Chief of Staff, and for a time, acting Chief of Staff, until 1973 when he took his last assignment. He became Commander-in-Chief of the US Readiness Command and held that position until his retirement on 4 September 1974. He currently resides in Florida where he continues to serve as a military consultant to the government.

This was General Palmer's first book and it took him approximately ten years to write it. His varied experiences gave him a unique perspective of the war in Vietnam. He was able to criticize and commend the various players in the decision-making process, including the military for their conduct of the war, and the politicians for their management of the war. A writer from The New York Times best illustrates this when he said, "He [General Palmer] writes with a clarity and candor remarkable in any military memoir, offering severe (but not rancorous) judgements on himself and his colleagues." (4:6)

This background information will aid in understanding the following chapters of this project.

## Chapter Two

### A SYNOPSIS OF AMERICA'S INVOLVEMENT IN VIETNAM

The 25-Year War: America's Military Role in Vietnam was written based on the memoirs and the first-hand experiences of General Bruce Palmer, Jr. He begins the book by stating the following:

This book looks at the Vietnam War from the perspective of a senior military professional who held important positions of responsibility during the conflict. The focus of the book is not on fighting--bloody, uncompromising and frustrating--nor is it on the dauntless American men and women who served in the operational areas. It is rather on the higher levels of conflict including the strategic crossroads of the political and the military.... Our government, itself lacking a clear understanding of what it means and what it takes to commit a nation to war, failed to persuade the public that it was necessary for us to fight in Vietnam. This was a fatal weakness, and as a result of it, the American people did not lend their wholehearted support to the war effort. This might have been obtained had the Congress been deeply involved in the decision to commit our forces to battle and been persuaded that a declaration of war was in national interest. But this was not the case. Rather, the president intellectually committed the nation to war without Congressional backing. A confused American people could not even dimly grasp the reasons why we were fighting in a little-known region halfway around the world. Nevertheless, our motives and objectives as a government were straightforward and devoid of territorial ambitions or self aggrandizement. True, we made mistakes in Vietnam, but by and large they were honest mistakes and many were mistakes only in hindsight. Calling something a mistake is, of course, an exercise of personal opinion and can set off controversy. Significant mistakes will be pointed out, but with no intent to place blame for them on any particular individuals. (2:vii,viii)

General Palmer's book is a reflection of the previous thoughts and is divided into two parts. Part I deals with the broad topic of the American involvement in Vietnam. He develops a chronological order of events starting in 1963 and continuing until 1975. Each section in Part I correlates to a period of time and the position General Palmer held at that time. His initial discussion on the JCS and Vietnam encompasses the period 1963-1967. Next, he examines the Corps Command and Army Headquarters from 1967-1968. The transition years from 1968-1969 follow. He then flows to the period of Vietnamization, which was 1969-1971. In closing Part I, he covers the cease fire years, 1972-1973 and the final war years from 1973-1975.

Part II is General Palmer's assessment of the Vietnam War. He identifies some positive aspects of US operational performance, examines the US strategy, offers an alternate strategy, and outlines the lessons learned from the war. Part II will be discussed in chapter three of this paper. The remainder of this chapter will expand on Part I of the book.

General Palmer starts the book by focusing on the role of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff and their influence on the events of Vietnam from 1963-1965. He is quick to address how the personalities and styles of both the civilian and military leaders influenced their way of doing business. (2:17) He uses the JCS as an example of corporate hardheadedness when they refused to listen to an Army advisor returning from Vietnam in the mid-sixties. The advisor had evidence that proved the US government was not realistically evaluating the seriousness of the situation in Vietnam based on reports from senior military and civilian officials. Shortly thereafter, President Diem was assassinated and South Vietnam plunged into a state of disarray. (2:12,22)

Throughout the war, debates continued in the JCS over US commitment, objectives, command structure, and strategy. (2:28,34) The author is particularly alarmed that the JCS constantly submitted recommendations to the Secretary of Defense and the President despite the fact they were not in harmony. General Palmer attributes this to a feeling that the situation in Vietnam was continually getting worse and strong military action was needed. So, to convince their civilian superiors to support such actions, the JCS felt a unanimous position was needed. (2:34)

The author concludes the JCS lost control of force generation and deployment, were unable to articulate an effective military strategy, and, finally, failed to advise their civilian superiors that the strategy being pursued would probably fail and the objectives would not be achieved.

The next perspective Palmer covers is the complexity of the Corps Command and Army Headquarters in Vietnam. The author worked for General William Westmoreland in each of these organizations and much of the discussion focuses on Westmoreland and his staff. Also outlined was the military structuring in both of these operations and the structure of the South Vietnamese Army. Battles are depicted highlighting problems in command, control, and coordination of US, South Vietnamese and third country forces. He completes this section discussing logistic nightmares that evolved in Vietnam.

During the transition years, 1968-1969, General Palmer was assigned as Army Vice Chief of Staff where he remained through the final years of direct American involvement in Vietnam. The author once again worked for General Westmoreland and came to realize during this job the magnitude of public unrest and dissent for the Vietnam War. He was shocked when civilian leaders denied their involvement in the Army's stateside mission to gather information on American nationals. The truth was that the civilian leaders had directed the activities. (2:82) General Palmer also identifies other problems such as the unfair draft system, the short term rotation system, "fragging" incidents, dissensions, the My Lai and Green Beret tragedies, drug abuse, and racial incidents that he attributes to the war. (2:83-86) President Nixon came into office during this period and soon realized the US could not and would not support the war effort and disengagement began. (2:93-94)

With the disengagement underway, the policy process of Vietnamization was implemented. General Palmer examines this process as well as the "secret bombing" in Cambodia. He feels the Cambodian operations of 1970 became a major factor in accelerating the withdrawal of US forces and was the second major turning point in the war. According to the author, Tet 1968 was the first major turning point. This offensive ended any hope of a US imposed solution to the war. The 1970 Cambodia operation fatally wounded South Vietnam's chances to survive and remain free. Although the operation bought time for the allies, it forced Hanoi to develop its primitive cross-country routes to supply its forces in the South. Also without the American combat troops, the South Vietnamese could not fully exploit their territorial gains. Finally, this operation brought about dramatic cuts in US military advisors and military aid to the South. (2:103,104)

During this period, the civilian chain of command was being disrupted by National Security Advisor, Henry Kissinger. Palmer feels that Kissinger became, for all intents and purposes, the defacto chairman of the JCS, managed to poach on the territory of the Secretary of Defense and, in essence, usurped the



responsibilities of the Secretary of State. (2:107)

The transition years were followed by the cease-fire years, 1972-1973. Vietnamization continued and South Vietnamese troops increased in strength while the Nixon Administration attempted to get negotiations under way with North Vietnam. The North, meanwhile, prepared for an offensive that took place in the spring of 1972. Haiphong Harbor was mined and the B-52s increased their bombings. During this period General Palmer was appointed the acting Chief of Staff for the Army. He summarizes the events of 1972 as follows:

As 1972 wore on and the US presidential elections loomed, the pressure to reach an agreement with Hanoi became superheated. The North Vietnamese obviously had decided to wait out the American election, but even after Nixon's strong victory at the polls, continued to be intransigent. This led to the controversial round-the-clock "Christmas bombing" of North Vietnam in late 1972, the heaviest of the war. It had the desired effect, for Hanoi finally agreed to a cease-fire on 29 January 1973. Our POWs in the North were to be freed at last. (2:129)

This period marked the departure of the last combat troops left in South Vietnam.

Palmer concludes Part I by describing the final war years from 1973-1975. He examines the terms of the cease-fire agreement and determines they greatly favored North Vietnam. At this same time, the Watergate scandal surfaced and President Nixon resigned. General Palmer's following remarks best describes his view of America's involvement in Vietnam.

...the fact remains that the United States did not do well by its hapless ally. We left South Vietnam with the legacy of a fatally flawed strategy that gave the strategic and offensive initiatives to Hanoi, as well as a cease-fire agreement that allowed a large NVA force to remain in place in key locations in South Vietnam, granted Hanoi secure sanctuary bases in Laos and Cambodia and secure lines of communications from the North to the South, and gave North Vietnam a secure logistic pipeline from the USSR and China for the wherewithal to continue a protracted war strategy. Moreover, we did not maintain an adequate flow of military aid to the South, nor did we give the country the necessary capability to survive. (2:151)

On 27 April 1975 South Vietnam surrendered the country to the

North Vietnamese Army.

This chapter has described America's involvement in Vietnam as seen by General Palmer. His experiences in Vietnam and Washington give him a unique perspective on the war. In the next chapter, we will look at the author's assessment of the war and compare it with other authors, particularly, Colonel Harry G. Summers, Jr.

### Chapter Three

#### GENERAL PALMER'S ASSESSMENT COMPARED

In Part II of The 25-Year War, General Palmer assesses the US operational performance during the war. He accomplishes this by identifying the positive aspects of the performance while re-emphasizing the negative aspects depicted in Part I. He also examines the US strategy and offers an alternate strategy that he feels might have changed the outcome of the war. Finally, he outlines the lessons both military and civilian leaders should be aware of in the event the US becomes involved in a similar war. In order to determine if General Palmer's assessment is sound, it will be compared with another author's assessment. In the book, On Strategy: The Vietnam War in Context, Colonel Harry G. Summers gives a critical strategic appraisal of the war, an assessment considered controversial, by some. On Strategy correlates heavily with Clausewitz theory and the principles of war. Colonel Summers is a Army strategist who served in Vietnam and, later, as a negotiator in Hanoi and Saigon. Strategy and the principles of war will be the main focus for the comparison. General Palmer critiques Summers' book as follows: "At times its judgments about senior military leadership (specifically U.S. Army) are harsh and in my view not entirely fair, but on balance the book is well worth study, particularly by military professionals." (2:216)

The author states that Part I of the book painted a pretty bleak picture of US performance during the war, and didn't give any credit for the positive things that happened. He starts Part II, his assessment of the war, by identifying some of the positive aspects of the war. He contends that during the period from 1962-1969, the Armed Force's performance was professional and commendable. (2:155) The author highlights many examples of this positive performance, one of which is the ability of the Army to tailor the forces to meet the demands of a unique environment and the tactics of the enemy. (2:56) This was necessary because following the Korean War, the US had built a mechanized army to fight the war in Europe. In Vietnam the U.S. needed light infantry to strike quickly and move through the dense jungle.

Another positive aspect of the war was the emergence of the helicopter. In Vietnam it established its usefulness as a troop

carrying assault vehicle, a gunship for escort and close-air support missions, an attack, tank killing weapon, and a scout. (2:56) Today's AirLand Battle doctrine uses the helicopter in very similar roles as a result of their success in Vietnam.

Even after 1969, when performance began to deteriorate as a result of low morale and anti-war sentiment back in the States, General Palmer praises the results of offensive air efforts and the intelligence efforts of the CIA. (2:159,163) Except for logistic support of the large Vietnam operation, the author concludes little else relating to performance had positive results.

The previous thoughts on the positive aspects of the war are put into perspective by this comment of Colonel Summers: "One of the most frustrating aspects of the Vietnam war from the Army's point of view is that as far as logistics and tactics were concerned we succeeded in everything we set out to do." (3:1) This response is a primary reason why so many studies have been conducted to analyze the Vietnam war. How could we win the battles and yet lose the war? General Palmer remains convinced US strategic vulnerability was a major factor, but prefaces his examination of US strategy by listing several handicaps and disadvantages that caused this vulnerability.

Siding with a country that lacked political and social cohesion was a primary impediment for the US. The people of South Vietnam were peaceful in nature and the US failed to infuse in the people of South Vietnam with the kind of determination and zeal the communists achieved throughout North and South Vietnam starting a generation earlier. (2:174)

Additionally, the US misjudged the extent of subversion in Vietnam and underestimated the will, tenacity, and determination of the Hanoi regime. (2:175) As the war continued, they became more persistent. On numerous occasions during the war, the US thought they had achieved a tactical victory only to find the Viet Cong or North Vietnamese bounced back with even more strength and commitment.

The author also lists the US's over-confidence in superior technology, Yankee ingenuity, industrial and military might, and a tradition of crisis-solving in peace and war as a handicap. (2:176) General Palmer states:

Many American military leaders, myself included, realized the serious disadvantages of limiting ourselves to the defensive and confining our ground operations to the territorial boundaries of South Vietnam, but still believed that we would somehow find

a way to overcome these handicaps--the "can do" syndrome. But for most of us the realization that time would run out on us very quickly came too late. (2:176)

General Palmer continues his description of handicaps and disadvantages by stating that few Americans understood the nature of the war - a mixture of conventional, unconventional and guerrilla warfare. (2:176) While the US chose to fight a localized war with limited objectives, Hanoi never lost sight of its objectives. (2:176) General Palmer states, "...from Hanoi's point of view it was all out total war." (2:176) Limited goals also forced the US to fight a defensive war on the enemy's terms. (2:177) As a result, the enemy maintained the initiative.

Lastly, but certainly not the least of the handicaps and disadvantages, he feels the US revealed its intentions to the enemy by trying to seek peace negotiations when the U.S. was not in a bargaining position. The North Vietnamese interpreted these attempts as a sign of weakness and a lack of confidence by the US. (2:177) The numerous bombing halts are prime examples of the attempts to force negotiations. Much of what had been gained during the bombing was lost during the halts. Each of these handicaps and disadvantages influenced the strategy used in Vietnam.

The author suggests that U.S. strategy consisted of two parts; the air offensive in the North and the ground war in the South. (2:177) The air offensive strategy was debated constantly in Washington while the ground war was left to General Westmoreland. He chose to fight a war of attrition, confined to South Vietnam borders, and led by American troops. (2:178) General Palmer describes several deficiencies in this strategy:

First, we put too much faith in the effectiveness of the air offensive, hindered by a policy of gradual escalation and essentially used in isolation, to make the North Vietnamese cease and desist. Air interdiction was more effective, but again, because it was employed without ground operations, or at least the threat of such operations, it was not as effective as it might have been.... (2:178)

Second, we were fatally handicapped by a strategy of passive defense and could not decisively erode the enemy's forces. Despite enormous casualties, the North Vietnamese actually built up their strength in the South....

The strategy of passive defense, moreover, dictated

that large combat forces be deployed throughout much of South Vietnam. The unlimited mission of defending all the country and defeating the enemy wherever he could be brought to battle [placed huge] demands on US manpower and material resources. The geographic configuration of South Vietnam and the nature of its road and railroad systems...added up to a major vulnerability.

Third, we tried to Americanize the war, quickly building to a large combat force...by the end of 1966, widely deployed throughout South Vietnam.... By 1968, the American force had expanded to roughly 11 division equivalents and nine tactical air wings.... This massive American effort had to be discouraging and disconcerting to our South Vietnamese allies....

Perhaps most serious was that, engrossed in U.S. operations, we paid insufficient attention to our number one military job, which was to develop South Vietnamese armed forces that could successfully pacify and defend their own country.... (2:178,179)

The portion of General Palmer's assessment of the war that is most unique is that he offers an alternative strategy that he feels could have won the war without increased expenditures of personnel or material. His concept has two strategic thrusts: First, he would have concentrated US and allied troops along the northern portion of South Vietnam, near the DMZ. If possible, this defensive line would have extended from the South China Sea through Laos, cutting off the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

Second, the US Navy would have maintained a constant naval presence off the coast of North Vietnam, threatening possible invasion at any time. Also, US air and naval power could have blockaded the northern ports. "Strategic bombing" of the North would have been avoided. The overall focus of the strategy would have been on the development of South Vietnamese capability to defend itself from the North. (2:182,183)

General Palmer feels his strategy could have provided economy of force, denial of entry into the South by the NVA, given the US the initiative, lessened the logistic requirements, degraded the shock of American presence, cut off the Viet Cong, and reduced the number of casualties. (2:185) He confirms that others in the military suggested alternative strategies, but none were accepted. Since none of the alternative strategies were employed, their success or failure cannot be determined. However, General Palmer suggests that the US can gain something from the failed strategy we used if both military and civilian

leaders are willing to learn from the lessons of the war. He offers several lessons that if ignored, could result in far more serious consequences than in Vietnam.

General Palmer feels one obvious lesson is that public acceptance and support of a war requires a consensus of understanding among the people and agreement that the effort is in the country's best interest. He goes on to say that to achieve such a consensus, the American people must perceive a clear threat or need to cause the US to go to war. (2:189,190) The author contends that our nation was committed to war in Vietnam with our leaders knowing full well that South Vietnam was not a US vital interest. (2:189) Neither Congress nor the public was involved in this decision and as the war progressed, people began to question its validity. The public actually began to feel the government was trying to deceive them. (3:23) General Palmer clarifies this lesson in the following remarks: "It seems rather obvious that a nation cannot fight a war in cold blood, sending its men and women to distant fields of battle without arousing the emotions of the people. I know of no way to accomplish this short of a declaration of war by the Congress and national mobilization." (2:190)

Colonel Summers supports General Palmer when he says, "All of America's previous wars were fought in the heat of passion. Vietnam was fought in cold blood and that is intolerable to the American people." (3:23)

Another lesson was the failure of U.S. leaders to read the public concerning the acceptable duration of hostilities. The public was not willing to stand for a war of undetermined nature and no foreseeable end. (2:190) The real problem with this lesson was that these same leaders also misjudged the duration of this "limited" war.

Palmer also feels the failure to acquire allied approval and support greatly damaged the legitimacy of the war effort. (2:191) He suggests that the political and psychological benefits of allied approval and support can be greater than the military value.

In yet another lesson, General Palmer presents a strong case to indicate that the US was slow to recognize weaknesses in the enemy and their supporters. The US did not understand the depth of the Sino-Soviet split, overestimated the threat of Chinese communist expansion, and misunderstood Chinese equities in the Vietnam war. (2:192) He feels the US could find itself faced with these same misunderstandings or plain ignorance concerning the Middle East, Latin America, Africa, or the Pacific Basin.

The most significant lesson may be the failure of the US to adhere to the principles of war. General Palmer suggests that several principles were violated, and the reason they were violated was that neither civilian nor military leaders were well-grounded in the principles. (2:193) The author lists the objective, the offensive, mass, economy of force, maneuver, and unity of command as the principles most violated.

The author begins the discussion of the principles by saying, "The first principle, the objective, focuses on our military aim. What is to be accomplished? Goals must be clearly defined, decisive, and attainable....[In Vietnam] we lacked a clear objective and an attainable strategy of a decisive nature...." (2:193)

Colonel Summers concurs with General Palmer when he makes the following statement:

[In Vietnam] instead of focusing our attention on the external enemy, North Vietnam--the source of the war--we turned our attention to the symptom--the guerrilla war in the south--and limited our attacks on the north to air and sea action only. In other words, we took the political task (nation building and counterinsurgency) as our primary mission and relegated the military task (defeating external aggression) to a secondary consideration. (3:65)

The confusion over objectives... had a devastating effect on our ability to conduct the war." (3:66)

The second principle Palmer examines is the offensive. He defines the offensive as how the objective will be attained. He stresses the fact that offensive action is necessary to achieve desired results, to seize the initiative, and to maintain freedom of action. (2:193) These terms are alive today in AirLand Battle doctrine or counter air operations of the current US strategy. The author feels we violated the principle of the offensive by relinquishing the advantages of the strategic offensive to Hanoi.

Colonel Summers says, "The offensive is strategic when it leads directly to the political objective--the purpose for which the war is being waged." (3:67) He adds, "[North Vietnam's] posture throughout the course of the war was the strategic offensive with the conquest of South Vietnam as their objective." (3:69)

Palmer examines the next three principles together. They



include mass (concentrating superior power at the critical time and place for a decisive purpose); economy of force (skillful and prudent use of combat power); and maneuver (the disposition of force to maximize combat power). (2:193) The author states that all three principles support the second principle, the offensive. Mass was violated because the US could not concentrate forces as a result of our strategy. The spreading of forces throughout South Vietnam precluded the US from effectively using economy of force and maneuver. Except for the "Christmas bombing" in 1972, airpower violated many principles, especially mass. (1:173; 2:193)

According to Colonel Summers, the principles of mass, economy of force and maneuver should be directed against the enemy's center of gravity. He says we adopted a strategy that focused on none of the North Vietnamese centers of gravity. Summers adds that a major turning point in the war evolved around the decision not to mass for the Vietnam war at the expense of economy of force throughout the rest of the world. (3:81) He summarizes the discussion on the principles of mass, economy of force, and maneuver in the following manner:

One of the great ironies of the Vietnam war was that our technical ability to use the principles of mass, economy of force and maneuver far exceeded that of the North Vietnamese. ...our strategic failure to apply the principles of the objective and the offensive caused us to fritter away our advantages in mass, economy of force and maneuver in tactical operations rather than apply them to a strategic purpose. (3:85)

The final principle of war that General Palmer addresses is unity of command. His definition of this principle is vesting a single commander with requisite authority to obtain unity of effort toward a common goal. He points out that HQ MACV tried to be the US theater headquarters and the operational headquarters while also handling the advisory efforts. Each of these requiring the undivided attention of the commander. (2:193,194)

Colonel Summers is once again supportive of Palmer's discussion of unity of command by stating that this principle was not only lacking in the theater of operations, but also in Washington. (3:91) He goes on to say:

Although we did not obtain unity of command in the Vietnam war, the failing was not the cause of our defeat but rather a symptom of a larger deficiency --failure to fix a militarily attainable political objective. Without such an objective we did not have unity of effort at the national level, which made it

impossible at the theater level to obtain coordinated action among the ground war in the South, the pacification effort and the air war in the North." (3:92)

Summers concludes his thoughts on the principle of unity of command by stating the following:

Unity of command has plagued the American military for many years. ...the Department of Defense is charged with two distinct tasks. One is the normal peacetime task of preparation for war. The other is the task of conducting war itself. These divergent tasks would be automatically reconciled in the event of total war, but as the Vietnam war made obvious, they work against each other during limited war. (3:119)

General Palmer concludes his assessment of the war with the following thoughts:

I conclude that America must change its traditional way of fighting a war. We cannot afford to follow the unwise, unsound and wasteful manpower and logistic policies we have pursued in the past wars, particularly in Korea and Vietnam. We cannot count on possessing greatly superior weapons and equipment in unlimited amounts. Rather, we must, as a matter of previously announced policy, plan to mobilize the necessary men and women to meet a major emergency with the intentions of them serving for the duration. (2:207)

## Chapter Four

### CONCLUSION

To conclude this project, I believe the following citations accurately describe the quality and usefulness of General Palmer's book, The 25-Year War. The first quote from the Armed Forces Journal reads as follows:

A brilliant post mortem--a clear summary of a complex autopsy of a victim who died of multiple, avoidable, unintended self-inflicted wounds....This is probably the most complete and useful after-action report written by any American military commander in this Nation's 208-year history. (2:jacket)

The second citation comes from the New York Times Book Review:

...The 25-Year War should be read, and not merely for historical interest. Unless the United States is willing to permanently forgo the use of force in defense of its interests overseas, Americans must think through the military lessons of Vietnam. They must ask not only under what conditions they should use force but how to use it, should that prove necessary. One need not think that most or even many foreign policy problems will yield to the application of military power to know that slogans cannot substitute for careful thinking, and that past mistakes cannot be avoided simply by damning them. (5:7)

If we assume these reviews and many others like them are accurate assessments of General Palmer's book, and further if we accept that Colonel Summers' concurrence with Palmer's analysis is sound, then The 25-Year War's depiction of valuable lessons to be learned should aid this country in preparing for future wars. In my opinion two lessons merit the most attention. The first is our failure to have a sound strategy and the second is our violation of the principles of war.

There is no question that during the Vietnam war our strategy failed and we did not achieve our objectives. We have no excuse for not formulating a sound strategy based on national interests and objectives in the event another Vietnam erupts tomorrow. We

must be prepared to fight the war at any level throughout the spectrum of conflict. Once the strategy has been formulated, and the necessity arises to use it, we must ensure that we adhere to the principles of war.

We as military professionals must understand the proper use and limitations of these principles. They are not in themselves the only means to achieve the objective, but they are an essential part of the art and science of warfare. The principles must be studied as a unit because each different battle may require emphasis and importance to shift from one principle to another. General Palmer and Colonel Summers illustrated the results of disregarding the principles and we cannot afford the devastating effects of another Vietnam.

As military professionals, we have a responsibility to understand as much as we can about the war we lost. The 25-Year War: America's Military Role in Vietnam provides insight into the war as seen by a senior military leader who was not shy about identifying both military and political problems.

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